

“New Woman” in Rabindranath Tagore’s Short Stories: An Interrogation of “Laboratory”

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Abstract

This article investigates Rabindranath Tagore’s perspectives on women as seen through his short stories. While his poems primarily describe beauty, nature and his search for what is beyond mundane life, his short stories deal with the lives of ordinary people. Women’s struggles and sufferings are particularly highlighted. This article argues that while on one hand Tagore reveals the unequal social structure that oppresses women, on another, he creates courageous women who challenge tradition. His short story “Laboratory,” written a few months before his death, expresses his latest views on women and gives shape to the “new woman,” whom he perceives as arriving in India in the near future. In so doing, Tagore urges women to find an identity of their own, and realise that wifhood and motherhood are but fractions of their whole being.

Abstract in Malay

Artikel ini mengkaji pandangan Rabindranath Tagore terhadap wanita seperti yang dilihat menerusi cerpen-cerpennya. Sewaktu puisi-puisi beliau mengutarakan keindahan, alam semulajadi dan pencariannya melangkaui hidup yang membosankan, cerpen-cerpen beliau sebaliknya menyentuh hidup orang kebanyakan, terutamanya penderitaan dan usaha keras wanita. Artikel ini membincangkan bagaimana dari satu segi, Tagore mendedahkan ketidakadilan struktur masyarakat yang menindas wanita, dan dari segi yang lain, mencipta wanita-wanita berani yang mencabar tradisi. Cerpen beliau “Laboratory,” ditulis beberapa bulan sebelum kematiannya, mengutarakan pandangan terkini terhadap wanita dan mencetuskan konsep “wanita baru,” yang dilihat Tagore sebagai akan wujud di India dalam masa terdekat. Oleh yang demikian, Tagore menggalakkan wanita untuk mencari identiti mereka sendiri dan menyedari bahawa menjadi isteri dan ibu hanyalah sebahagian daripada keseluruhan peranan mereka.

Keywords

Tagore, short stories, new woman, identity, wifhood, motherhood

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Keywords in Malay

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Introduction

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) was a “myriad-minded man” (Dutta and Robinson 1). He wrote extensively in various creative genres, e.g. poetry, drama, fiction and non-fictional prose; composed numerous songs; painted over 3,000 pictures; thought about rural reconstruction, environment and nature; took an interest in science, and established a university in West Bengal. Critics have written so much on so many aspects of Rabindranath that it is hard to discover an area to write on. And yet not much has been written on his thoughts on women, although he wrote extensively about them. This paper proposes to explore his vision and views on women as reflected in his short stories. However, in this brief article, my focus will be limited to only one of the 119 stories he wrote, “Laboratory.” My selection of this particular story is based on two considerations. First, its historical importance in the context of the time it was written. Published in September-October 1940, about a year before the writer passed away in August 1941, it was practically one of his last stories. Second, by the time he wrote the story, Rabindranath had devoted considerable thought to women. Women had been at the core of his many poems, songs, essays and paintings. “Laboratory” marks his matured and almost his last deliberation on women. When published, it dazzled the readers and created a stir among the admirers of literature.

While Rabindranath was never comfortable with strident assertions of women’s rights, and was not kind to those who were known as feminists (Tagore, *Chitthipatra*), he showed a remarkable understanding of woman’s psyche, perceived the injustice of an unequal social structure, and advocated for greater freedom and decision-making power for women in the family and the larger society. In addition to his remarkable stories about young girls (of which “The Postmaster” is a masterpiece), Tagore’s short stories can be seen as representing three facets of women’s lives: i) the romance between men and women, ii) social oppression of women (brilliantly portrayed in stories like “Haimanti”) and iii) the birth of the “new woman” – that is, a woman who challenges convention and seeks to make decisions about her own life. It is the third theme only that this paper is concerned with.

In Rabindranath’s early thinking, women had two principal roles – mother and lover (Pal, Vol. 5: 237). The loving nature of mother has been portrayed in many of his stories; Anandamoyee in *Gora*, Jatin’s aunt in “Shesher Ratri” (The Last Night) and Rasmoni in “Rasmonir Chhele” (Rasmoni’s Son) are a few examples. Romantic love between a man and a woman is the basis of his stories such as “Dalia” and “Joy Parajoy” (Victory and Defeat). However,

women's role as lovers has received primacy in his poems. In *Sonar Tori* and *Chitra* romanticism dominates, and the beautiful woman finds her ultimate expression in the poem "Urvashi":

For ages you have been the world's lover,
Oh you, Urvashi of unparalleled beauty
(“Urvashi,” *Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol.1: 511).²

In an article in *Prabasi*, Kazi Abdul Wadud suggested, “Rabindranath’s expressions have two distinct aspects to it: that of a mystical player of the flute, and of a visionary (Wadud, *Prabasi* 497). Even though his visionary perceptions have been reflected in many of his poetical writings, such as *Chaitali*, *Naivedya Palataka*, *Khaya* and *Gitanjali*, I believe the visionary in him has found its fullest expressions in his prose literature, i.e. essays, letters, novels and short stories. Of these, my focus is only on short stories. In a forthcoming article, I have reviewed some of his short stories from *Galpaguchha*, such as “Shasti” (Punishment), “Streer Patra” (A Wife’s Letter), “Aparichita” (The Unfamiliar Woman), “Badnam” (Ill Repute) and “Nashtoneer” (The Broken Home), and argued that in addition to the roles of mother and lover which Tagore attributed to women, he had discovered another facet of women as well. He did not give it a name, but we know what it was. It was the “new woman” in a new age. My aim in this essay is to examine this particular image of woman envisioned by Rabindranath and to do so I have selected just one story: “Laboratory.” “Laboratory” is not included in his well-known collection of short stories, *Galpaguchha* (A Bouquet of Stories). It is included in his book *Teen Sangee* (Three Companions). According to Pramatha Nath Bishi, Tagore’s writings in the last phase of his life increasingly gave calls for liberation of the individual:

He has repeatedly sent forth summons to free individuals from bondages overcoming hurdles. At one end of this invocation for women is the poem “Mukti” and at the other end are stories like “Haldar Goshthi” (The Haldar Clan), “Streer Patra,” “Poila Number” (Number One), etc. The last such invocation is in the story “Laboratory.” (Bishi, *Rabindra Sarani* 236)

To comprehend fully the main theme of Tagore’s constantly evolving thoughts on women, we will first need to turn to his time.

The Era of Rabindranath

Born in 1861 into an illustrious family, Rabindranath grew up in the heart of Calcutta. He came of age at a time when the currents of three movements had reached the shores of India: i) the religious: Rammohan Roy had founded the

² All translations from Bengali are mine.

Brahmo Samaj (1828), which had a profound impact on a section of *bhadrolok* community, including Tagore’s family; ii) the literary: “a literary revolution” had been pioneered, especially in Bengal, by the charismatic writer Bankimchandra; and iii) the political: a nationalist movement had started “to give voice” to Indian people’s discontent against colonial rule. The poet’s mind and sensibilities were shaped by these influences (Das Gupta 8-10).

Rabindranath lived for eighty eventful years in colonial Bengal, and his views about women changed over time. There were fast changes in India which inevitably left a footprint on his writings. Any modern history book will tell us of the shifts in political, economic and social circumstances from the middle of the nineteenth to the 1940s. There is no need to go into all the details. I will confine my discussion only to the realm of literary developments in Bengal.

When Rabindranath was born, the elements of romance found in European literature had become a pervasive theme in Bengali creative writing (Sen 378). It was Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay (1838-94), who had introduced the concept of romantic love into Bengali literature. Rabindranath took the romantic tradition to great heights. Although Rabindranath dominated the literary field in Bengal, other major writers, such as Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay (1876-1938) and Kazi Nazrul Islam (1898-1976) also appeared during his time. In the mid-1920’s, there emerged a powerful group of younger writers, who considered themselves modernists and gathered around the journal, *Kallol*. Although admiring of Rabindranath, this group tried deliberately to break away from his influence (Ayub 18). Some of these writers espoused women’s sexual liberation and freedom from male control. Rabindranath was criticised for the absence of realism and physicality in his writings. The criticism of this new generation must have affected the poet, but the attack was not fully justified. For example, in *Binodini* of *Choker Bali* and the nude “Urvashi,” as well as in his short story “Laboratory,” we find women as seductress and physically awakened.

It needs to be mentioned here that with the introduction of women’s education, women, too, had begun to write and publish since the late nineteenth century. The majority among them advocated traditionally prescribed values for women. But, and this is more to our purpose, there emerged another trend, though not yet prominent among female writers. Some of the newly educated women, earlier illiterate and superstition-riddled, raised the banner of self-respect and self-confidence. A more rebellious note emerged with the advent of the freedom movement. Not just the educated elements, but women from all sections of the society *en masse* jumped into the fray of the independence movement. Till then political activities were the domain solely of men, but with the nationalist movement, the barrier broke down. The effect of this change

was felt in the domestic arena. I have previously written on this topic,³ but to recap briefly, women for the first time saw themselves reflected through a public mirror. In fighting against the British domination, many of them also began to resent their domestic bondage. They started to question the inequality that existed between men and women. Even some housewives, ordinary and relatively unknown, started writing boldly in women's journals about women's marginalisation in society. The brilliant writer, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932), for example, questioned in a forceful voice: "I ask you, Mr. Astronomer, you are gazing at the sky, but why is your wife not by your side?" (*Rokeya Rachanabali* 30). Liberal men also raised their voices on discrimination between men and women. Kazi Nazrul Islam proclaimed:

I sing the song of equality
In my eyes there is no difference between men and women.
(“Naari,” *Nazrul Rachanabali*, Vol. 1: 241)

Such was, very briefly, the literary environment in the first three decades of the twentieth century in Bengal.

In the background of this new social awakening, Rabindranath initiated a new wave in his writings. In “Swadesh O Samaj” (Our Country and Society), a collection of thoughtful essays, he wrote:

The similarities and differences that mark the two distinct identities of men and women are both equally weighty. Yet, it is the differences that stand out with heavy bias. (*Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol. 13: 21)

In the context of his novel *Ghare Baire* (The Home and the World), he commented:

The period during which a writer is born gets reflected through his writings, may be, for a purpose.... The writer's period plays a role, deliberately or otherwise, in a writer's mind. (Mukhopadhyay, Vol.2: 546)

It is just not his time that was reflected in his writings; the farsighted “prophet” gave a new shape and direction to his time. His message was:

The discriminatory treatment of women had existed, complacently in our society for ages. Men must accept the responsibility for sustaining this discriminatory practice of the past. (*Rabindra Rachanaboli*, Vol. 13: 24)

³ See, for example, my essay, “Freedom Movement and Feminist Consciousness in Bengal, 1905-1929.”

Situating Rabindranath Tagore’s Writings

How do we situate Rabindranath in terms of his literary career and the development of his thoughts on women? While young Rabindranath, imbued with romanticism, looked at women as sources of inspiration and imagination, by the time he wrote his short story “Nashtoneer” (1903), he had learned to situate women in their real worlds, to see them as reasoning and desiring subjects who were constrained by social rules and norms. “Nashtoneer” can be thought to be as one of his earlier works to give voice to women’s subjectivity, and the theme was developed in many subsequent writings between 1903 and 1940. In Tagore’s reputed novel *Gora* (1910), Sucharita and Lalita, the two main female characters, held their personal views on marriage. In *Ghare Baire* (1916), Rabindranath advanced a new doctrine. Nikhil, the male protagonist, would give his wife Bimala personal freedom so that she might assess the true value of their love and then love him freely if she so desired. *Yogayoga* (Links and Gaps, 1930) depicts a conjugal relationship based on force rather than consent. The Tagorean message here is that Madhusudan’s – or any man’s for that matter – idea that women were simply beings to be kept and used was not acceptable (Bandopadhyay 377). Women had particular sensibilities and needed to be wooed not just claimed.

Although not painted in bold strokes, the appearance of the “New Woman” is perceptible in these novels. These women had started to fashion their individuality and to assert their independent ideas. Rabindranath understood the need for change from age-old belief systems. He contributed to the development of the “new woman” through short stories such as “Nashtoneer,” “Streer Patra,” “Aparichita,” “Badnaam,”⁴ and “Laboratory,” as well as in powerful poems such as “Sabala” (The Strong Woman, in *Mahua*, 1929) and “Mukti” (Freedom, in *Palataka*, 1918). Charulata in “Nashtoneer” had built her own world. She was intensely in love with her husband’s cousin Amal, and finally took the decision not to go away with her husband but live alone in the empty house. Her decision required both courage and the intelligence to assess the situation. In “Steer Patra,” Mrinal left her husband and his family to protest against the injustice they had committed against another woman. Having left home, facing the unfamiliar world, she discovered herself and her potential. In “Aparichita,” Kalyani protested against racial humiliation and decided to decline offers of marriage. Thus Rabindranath gave women both the space and the individuality to express their considered views on love, patriarchal control over women, relationships between men and women within and without marriage and decision-making power. He was, as it were, moving towards the creation of Sohini of his story, “Laboratory.”

⁴ These are short stories from *Galpaguchha*.

“Laboratory”

Let me recount the story briefly. Nandakishore, a Bengali scientist, marries a young Punjabi woman, Sohini, for love. A daughter of a poor, underprivileged family, Sohini lived with her elderly grandmother. Nandakishore appreciated her personality, married her and in exchange received her unstinted regard. Nandakishore had a laboratory which he set up single-handedly. It became his place of devoted work, almost an obsession with him. After his death, Sohini dedicated herself to preserving and developing the laboratory, and in this she took the help of their friend and her admirer Manmatha Chaudhury. She decided to put Rebati Bhattacharya, a meritorious student of Nandakishore in charge of the laboratory. Earlier, she had some plan to get her daughter, Nila, married to Rebati, but Nila had neither any depth of character, nor did she have any respect for the laboratory. Her aim was on the one hand to marry Rebati, a good soul, and on the other hand to continue with her wayward and wanton life with Nandakishore’s money. Sohini saw through her daughter’s motives. Instead of being blinded by mother’s love, she frustrated Nila’s plans. The laboratory was saved. This, in a nutshell, is the tale of “Laboratory.” Sohini, Nila and Rebati’s *pishi* (aunt) are the three principal female characters of this woman-centric story.

Pishi: The Mother

Pishi is Rebati’s mother figure. A woman of powerful personality, she is unwilling to see Rebati go out of her control. Rabindranath had scant regard for a character like her. His sympathy lay with the sort of mother who is a fountain of love, compassion and self-sacrifice. Such mothers were portrayed, as has been mentioned earlier, in the story “Rasmonir Chhele”: Bhabanicharan’s mother Brajasundari looked upon her stepson as her own and his wife Rasmoni single-handedly assumed the responsibility for an encumbered and wretched, poverty-stricken home. In the story “Shesher Ratri” (The Last Night), Jatin’s loving *mashi* (aunt) has been immortalised. Rebati’s *pishi* is not like them. Nevertheless, she is also a very affectionate aunt in the role of a mother, a mother power. She is the one who triumphs at the end of the story. Just when Rebati was getting ready to marry Nila, Pishima came in and called:

“Come with me, Rebati.”

And Rebati, like an obedient boy, followed her out. He did not look back for once. (*Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol 7: 1010)

Thus Nila’s marriage with Rebati broke off at the last moment, and Sohini’s laboratory was saved.

Nila: The Lover

The other two women characters, Nila and Sohini, are poles apart in their nature. Nila is extremely beautiful: “Nila is very fair complexioned... her skin glows like the white lotus of Kashmir with a hint of the blue lotus in her eyes” (*Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol 7: 980). She is well conscious of her good looks, perfectly skilled in wiles and deceptions. She belongs to the tribe of lovers. When Rebati was engrossed in his work in the laboratory deep into the night, Nila used to walk in her night clothes, and unabashedly perch herself on his lap, putting her arms round his neck. In public, she rested her head on his shoulder and told him, “You do not know how much I want you.” In reality, Nila had no love for Rebati. All that she wanted was money and to live life like a free bird. Her scheme was to marry this innocent man and then do what she pleased. She consults lawyers who are fascinated by her and with their help Nila tried to access Nandakishore’s money. She could not compete with her mother, but still had her own strengths. The source of power was her heady youth.

Sohini: The “New Woman”

With her sharp, bright eyes, and a lingering smile on her lips like a honed knife, Sohini is the “new woman” in the story. She has a magnetic personality. She walks in a sari with a knife hidden at her waist. Yet she uses her feminine charm and machinations when necessary. She asserts astutely, “Deceptions need strategies, just as wars do” (*Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol. 7: 984) Interestingly, Rabindranath had no strong disapproval of the tricks sometimes employed by women. In “Swadesh O Samaj,” he wrote:

Of course women do resort to deceptions, that is also another aspect of women’s strength. The demands of men when they exceed the women’s resources, are often met by ruses and machinations. It is we men who have dubbed women as enchantresses. Indeed we wanted them to so. If they come short, we give them a bad name, when they are useful, we sing their praise. (*Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol. 13: 21)

His Sohini not only uses these “feminine weapons” whenever she needs to, but more importantly, she applies her penetrating analytical mind and her razor sharp intellect. In her first meeting with Nandakishore, she tells him what the local trading community thought of him – that he being a Bengali, had no sense of business, and would be a sitting duck for them. “Well, I found,” Sohini, the shrewd woman continues, “that none of their intrigues worked. Rather they have fallen into your traps; but they still have not realised this, which I have” (*Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol. 7: 979). Nandakishore is taken aback, “Some girl she is!” he exclaims. Her assessment was perfect. “The spirit of her character comes shining from inside her. It is clear that she knows her worth” (*Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol. 7: 979-80). Sohini is fully aware of her merits, so she can

neither be neglected nor be defied. In Rabindranath's writings there are few instances of such sharp women as Sohini.

Sohini's love is that of a strong woman. It may be noted here that Rabindranath believed:

By natural instinct women are creative and graceful. It is women who make the home, which is no way less valuable or easier than running a business. The motivating force that shapes a home is a woman's love. Love is not merely an emotion of the heart. It is a force like the force of gravitation. (*Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol. 10: 546)

That love is exemplified in Sohini's character. Nandakishore has trained her in his own branch of discipline. He used to say, "An engineer husband and the wife, only a homemaker minding the kitchen, are not acceptable. The knots that bind them are not the same. I will make them uniform" (*Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol. 7: 980). If a man looks for a suitable wife, then they both must have similar missions in life. Equal status for men and women in a marriage is the message that Rabindranath conveys through Nandakishore, a male character. Although a similar concept of love is found in *Chitrangada*, an earlier writing of Rabindranath, where Chitrangada, a woman, claims a place beside her husband (*Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol. 5: 470), this modern concept of love comes out much more forcefully in "Laboratory."

Sohini and Nandkishpre's love is not restricted to a mere physical relation between husband and wife. A bond of respect and gratitude takes their conjugal love to a higher plane. Sohini explains, "He won me over by his steadfast mission of educating me" (*Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol 7: 986). Full of confidence in her own merit as well as of gratitude to her husband, Sohini maintains:

In relation to the qualities that he found in me, he regarded my shortcomings as insignificant. He reposed his complete trust in a non-descript woman like me, and I have never betrayed this trust.... My smallness he ignored, but gave me unstinted respect where he found I was worthy. Who knows to what level I would have sunk, had he not valued my good qualities? (*Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol 7: 997)

After Nandakishore's death, Sohini assumes the mantle of Nandakishore, from a deep sense of love and regard and undertakes his mission as hers with firm resolution: "This laboratory was my husband's sacred place of meditation. If I can find a suitable person to occupy the place beneath his altar and keep the lamp burning, then my husband wherever he is, will be at peace" (*Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol. 7: 982). Nandakishore has left behind enough money, but Sohini does not want it for herself. Every rupee of the inheritance is to be spent on the laboratory. Finding a person deserving of the laboratory has become her

sole aim in life. Through Sohini’s dedication to her mission, Rabindranath portrays the strong bond and loyalty of an exceptional lover.

Sohini is full of affection. She loves her aged grandmother, who has raised her. She manages to rescue the about-to-be-sold home of her grandmother with the money of Nandakishore, her would-be husband at the time, and when the grandmother falls ill, she runs to far away Ambala to look after her, leaving behind her precious laboratory. She is compassionate also towards animals. She picks up a stray dog and saves its life; she dreams of setting up a hospital for the disabled dogs and cats and rabbits who suffered from experiments in the laboratory. Without such tenderness of heart Sohini would have been an incomplete character.

Sohini is tender, not weak. A determined person, she does not allow any impediment to frustrate her mission. If Nila marries Rebati, scientific researches would be affected, “She will destroy whatever comes in her hands” (*Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol. 7: 992). This fear makes her change her mind about Nila’s marriage to Rebati. Her efforts now are directed towards keeping them separate: “She warned Nila, ‘No way must you ever go near Rebati. Let me tell you that there is just no possibility of your marriage to Rebati’” (*Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol. 7: 999). When Sohini returns from Ambala, she discovers that Nila is about to get married to Rebati, and is at the same time consulting lawyers on how to get her share of Nandakishore’s money. Sohini then publicly declares unequivocally that Nila is not Nandakishore’s daughter, “Who do you think your father is? Whose money are you trying to grab? How do you have the impudence to claim shamelessly that you are the daughter of such a noble man?” Sohini has no inhibition in admitting her infidelity. She says that Nandakishore was aware of it: “He received everything from me that he wanted... he was not bothered about anything else” (*Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol. 7: 1009).

Not only publicly, Sohini had earlier disclosed her infidelity to Manmatha Chaudhury in private:

I feel ashamed to confess that I had been wanton. The very thought that I have been close to a number of men still ruffles me.... Our temptations lie hidden under our flesh and bones, but flares up at the slightest provocation. It does not inhibit me to tell the truth that very early in my life I went to the bad. We women are not chaste all our life; pretensions are constantly killing us. Even women like Draupadi and Kunti⁵ have to behave like Sita

⁵ Draupadi and Kunti are characters in the *Mahabharata*. Draupadi had five husbands and five different men were fathers of Kunti’s five sons. Interestingly, because of their other eminent qualities, they are highly regarded in Indian mythology.

and Savitri.⁶ Let me tell you I had no clear perceptions between what was right and what was wrong. I had no teacher to guide me. So I plunged into evil ways as I have been able to come out of it. Yes, my body has been tainted, but not my mind. (*Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol. 7: 986-87)

It is certainly a bold statement not only about her, but about womankind in general. It is society which has forced women to suppress their physical desires and pretend indifference to the temptations of the flesh. In their hearts, however, the flame of desire has existed as strong as that of any man. And since Sohini had not suppressed her desires earlier in life, she had given birth to Nila, an illegitimate child.

Sohini's character is unique in Rabindranath's writings as well as in contemporary literature. Written at the end of the nineteen thirties, Sohini's forthright disclosure of infidelity was indeed startling and revolutionary. None of the detractors of Rabindranath, not even the "modernist" Kallol writers, had created such a character. A child out of wedlock is a disgrace for a mother – this was the entrenched view at the time as it is even today. For an Indian woman to admit her "sin" in public is a challenge to the establishment. Rabindranath probably intended to do that through Sohini.

Concluding Observations

Sohini, the "new woman," often says, "I am not a Bengali woman." A question arises in our mind. Why did Rabindranath make Sohini a Punjabi woman? Could it be that Rabindranath did not believe that Bengali women could be so spirited and bold? Surely, Pritilata Waddedar and Kalpana Dutta (Joshi) and other Bengali women were carrying firearms during the *biplabi* (revolutionary) movement in our freedom struggle (Mandal 88-100). Rabindranath's own niece Sarala Ghosal (Devi Chaudhurani) was an epitome of courage. Possibly Rabindranath did not wish to confine Sohini to Bengal, rather preferred to present her as a role model for women of India.

In this context, it is important to take note of Rabindranath's story "Badnaam." It was published in the journal *Prabasi* in June 1941, a few months after the publication of "Laboratory." Saudamini of "Badnaam" is also an unusual character. In daring, in intelligence, in deceptions, she is no less than Sohini. Sohini's objective in life is to save the laboratory; Saudamini's is to strengthen the struggle for freedom movement. Sohini loves her husband and assumes his mantle to sustain his life's work. Saudamini loves her husband and yet deceives him in order to continue her life's work. She tells her husband, "I

⁶ Sita, the wife of Rama in the *Ramayana*, is an epitome of chastity. Savitri, says a story in the *Purana*, brought back her dead husband alive by defeating the King of Death in an interesting debate.

love you and have looked after you to the best of my ability, and I hoodwinked you for the sake of what I consider my duty. The arduous mission that we have accepted leaves no room for love; it asks only to sacrifice oneself.” It has been the traditional Indian belief that husband is the supreme spiritual lord of a wife and the most trustworthy person; Saudamini attacks this tradition and Rabindranath does it through her. Can we then conclude that towards the end of his life, characters like Saudamini and Sohini came crowding in his thoughts? Portrayal of these characters only shows how far ahead of his time Rabindranath was in visualising the “new woman.”

Rabindranath’s early perception of women, as mentioned previously, was born out of romanticism. In his thirties when he became involved in looking after the family’s estates, he became aware of the day-to-day life of common people as well as the unfair social oppression of women (Bishi, *Rabindra Sarani* 9-10). During the last period of his life, Rabindranath’s perceptions relating to women became fully developed. He discovered that:

A woman’s identity is no longer limited to the role of a mother or a wife. We have arrived at a stage when women are demanding their right as human beings. They want to be counted unreservedly in their identity as individuals. (*Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol. 13: 28)

He could see that a new age was replacing the existing one:

I can feel that a new age has dawned in the world.... Women are coming forward to build the new civilisation. The purdah over their faces has vanished, and along with it has gone the purdah that kept their mind away from exposure to the outer world. (*Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol. 13: 380)

Rabindranath gave us some very powerful women characters befitting the new age. With that he assaulted unobtrusively in his own way the established social system and notions inimical to the advancement of women. In my view, his “new woman” for the new age is depicted most forcefully in his story ‘Laboratory.’ Sohini, a woman who in her dedication, in her success, in her outspoken adherence to truth, is, indeed, a many splendored personality.

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